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ABSTRACT

The Reggio Emilia preschools in Italy have much to offer U.S. early education practitioners. If adapted, based on an understanding of American culture and of how American children learn, four components of the Reggio Emilia model can be useful in American early childhood settings. First, projects based on the interests of children can be used to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon over an undetermined period of time. Second, children can be encouraged to express their thinking, feelings, and dispositions creatively in various modes of expression, with parents playing an important role in the learning process. Third, teachers should become systematic researchers into the ways that children learn and construct knowledge, carefully observing and documenting children's thinking and development. Fourth, teachers should recognize the educational possibilities of the environment, with its power to organize and promote personal relationships, create beauty, provide changes, and promote choices and activities. School administrators have an enabling role to play in school reform. They should encourage teachers to share their successes, invite parents to be part of the classroom, visit classrooms often, and provide teachers with the time, funding, and recognition needed to make meaningful changes in the classroom. Specific practical suggestions for teachers are presented for each model component. Contains 22 references. (AC)

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"American Early Education Reform: Adaptation Not Adoption from Reggio Emilia, Italy." Russell J. Firlik

One noteworthy aspect of American education during the past two plus decades has been its preoccupation with school reform and looking overseas for a new paradigm (Barth,1972; Murrow,1971; Silberman,1971). A more recent "second wave" of reforms are aimed at correcting the failures of the "first wave." Primarily, the new reforms attempt to improve the conditions of teaching (Barth,1991; Goodlad,1984; Lieberman & Miller,1986; Rushcamp & Roehler,1992, Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Nonetheless, after all that is said and done, more has been said then done with respect to what happens to most children in the classrooms- There is more than a modicum of truth that remarkably little in the classroom has changed.

There appears to be a number of reasons for the failure of the reform movers to effect fundamental change in the schools. First of course, is the difficulty inherent in any effort to bring about change in individuals. The familiar is comfortable and secure- it is the rare individual who is not threatened by basic change in his or her personal or professional life. It is difficult, too, to replicate seemingly successful educational programs. When reform is fashionable, it is all too easy to reproduce or adopt the form and structure of innovative practices while missing their essence. The creative involvement that goes into the development of new programs is seldom duplicated by those who would reproduce them. One simply has to reflect on the British construct of "open education- integrated day" and how it was "reproduced" across the pond.

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Alas, notable interest in the past five years is being expressed by American early childhood educators, researchers and administrators in the preschools programs (ages 3-6) in Reggio Emilia, Italy as a result of two events: NEWSWEEK (1991) feature of Reggio Emilia as being "the best preschools in the world," and the nation-wide traveling exhibition of children's work from Reggio Emilia, Italy- "The Hundred Languages of Children".

Having been closely associated with the progressive British Infant Schools for over twenty-five years, and having read about Reggio Emilia (Corsaro,1988; Gandini & Edwards,1988; Forman,1989), I was extremely interested in learning more about the child-centered preschools of Reggio Emilia (Firlik, 1993). As a principal of an elementary school, excited about early childhood education, and an adjunct professor of early education, I eagerly arranged to co-lead, with my wife- who was a member of the first American delegation to Reggio in 1990- two delegations of teachers and professors of education to Reggio Emilia in the past two years. That was the (micro) school culture. Emily and I next studied, in-depth, the macro society of this micro culture. Last summer, we spent 25 days living and "feeling" the City of Reggio Emilia. Admittedly, we actively engaged in eating more than our share of northern Italian cuisine! I must say, after many months of study and research, I am extremely optimistic about adapting what works so naturally in Italy into our American early education culture. Let me explain why I am so positive that the Reggio Emilia preschools have much to offer American early education practitioners.

In our last delegation, I observed several of the participants in the delegation, from the United States, Republic of China and Mexico, who were extremely keen on learning as much as possible about the philosophy, psychology, and curriculum characteristics of the Reggio Emilian Experience. One early childhood teacher, Penny, from a nearby school in Connecticut, and a graduate student interested in doing an independent study with me, was one such enthusiast. Upon her return to her preschool in Connecticut, Penny talked to me about being very cautious with respect to adopting what she carefully studied and observed for ten days in Reggio Emilia. She had no desire for instant reform, and I knew quite well the faith of Americans in pre-packaged programs imposed from lack of understanding mitigated against success. Nevertheless, what Penny allowed herself was time, ten months, to reflect on how all children learn and make certain adaptations from the Reggio Emilian practices into her American setting.

Penny explained, "we must first understand our own culture and what we already know about how children learn in our culture so that we are better able to adapt other international early childhood practices into our settings. " What Penny adapted from her Reggio Emilia experiences were those aspects she felt she understood best about the overseas experience in Italy.

From Penny's ten month experience and my several months of investigation with her, I selected four components from the complex Reggio Emilia Model that Penny used as guidlines in her classroom and could be adapted for any American early childhood setting:

Projects-

Multiple Modes of Expression- Teacher as Researcher-

Environment as the Third Educator.

1- PROJECTS

Projects are interactive activities that develop a deeper understanding by offering multiple perspectives of a phenomenon(a) over an undetermined period of time. Penny's children, ages 4 , 5 and 6 years, were excited about Space and space related information. It was a mutual decision between children and teachers that they agreed to explore, for an unspecified time, space, space life and planets. Only after many days of investigation, debate, and exploration, did the beginnings of an in-depth project start. Katz and Chard (1990) state that projects are activities that promote a deeper understanding through active engagement, and projects must have relevance to the interests of the children. Projects are meaningful because the cognitive and social activities inherent in the process changes behavior by offering multiple perspectives on a theme or topic. Some children wanted to learn more about the life of an astronaut, several decided to collect "moon" rocks and call them their pets. Many children spent their time reading, writing, painting and dressing like a space person, whatever that might be? Incidentally, the females were quite determined to point out that women are astronauts too. Shauna exclaimed, "My mom wanted to be an astronaut, me, too."

1 Projects

Practical suggestions for practitioners:

* Projects are initiated through children's everyday interests
* Work in small groups, not necessarily with the entire class
* If children are interested, it's well worth learning more about
* Integrated art, music, movement, research, hypothesis testing
* To sustain learning and a deeper understand, activities must be engaging, relevant and meaningful
* Penny followed George Forman's project-process guidelines:

1. Encourage many opportunities for brainstorming or verbal outpouring. Decide on an idea or hypotheses to investigate, e.g., Space Station and Space Craft
2. Draw, paint or sketch out what the phenomenon might look like.
3. Observe phenomenon in operation- real life, if possible, or through other visual and auditory means-video or films
4. After observing hypotheses in real operation, encourage children to change, modify the original based on their observations
5. Represent the changes in multiple symbolic ways- when satisfied, display for others to discuss different perspectives and points of view
6. During entire process, capture each stage through video, photographs and tape recording of discussions and debates (the relationship-thinking) that the took place during the project-process development

2- MODES OF EXPRESSION

One of the powerful beliefs of the Reggio Emilia teachers, given the support of their environment and encouragement from the pedagogistias (child development experts) and atelieristas (artists-in-residence), is that children poses powerful potentials and dispositions to create and express themselves in "one hundred languages" or modes of expression. As Penny's states, "the children were indeed encouraged to express their thinking, feelings, and dispositions in various and creative ways." Books and more books, research in the library, and quest speakers helped to facilitate their research, while simultaneously building an experience - base of understanding leading from concrete to more symbolic representations.

Penny describes the parent involvement over the ten month period both in and out of school as "absolutely incredible!" Engaging and relevant experiences such as art-craft work, drawings, an Observatory, construction of space stations, making an USS cardboard box spacecraft, songs, cooking, playdough space people, dress-up dramatic play, and photos were being actively persued in and out of the classroom.

Documentation in Reggio Emilia is an extremely important process. Penny video taped all of the different stages of the project development, and used this action-research documentation to form a closer link between school and home-parents and children. Moreover, Penny used this documentation for subsequent planning and "idea jumping" with her assistant teacher. The careful displays of children's work, with photos

demonstrating the step-by-step stages of the project process, were attractively placed around the room. Parents were invited and encouraged to join in the project at any stage. The parents, as in Reggio Emilia, were a very important component of the learning process in Penny's classroom.

Modes of Expression

Practical Suggestions for the Practitioner:

* "Education is the cultivation of the modes of expression." Read, M. (1958)
* Children are very capable, creative, and extremely expressive- Spark their imagination and creativity!
* Promote opportunities that foster children's inherent multiple intelligences
* Children learn directly from constructing, through actions and reactions, in their environments
* All children's work must be valued- Model and measure this value by carefully and attractively displaying their work
* Children learn from the models they see and the company they keep

3 -TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

Teacher as researcher is defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers." Here is where Penny grow and developed the most from her experiences observing and interacting with the teachers and children of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Penny explains, " I must continue to better utilize what I know about how children learn as they construct knowledge through active involvement and apply this knowledge to my situation and setting."

Penny orchestrated the inquiry, ensured that the environment fostered and encouraged children to utilize their multiple intelligences, integrated theory, research, and practice as she worked alongside the children and parents. One of the most challenging aspects of implementing any program, adapted or not, is to monitor, assess, and document the experiences of individuals as they grow intellectually, develop social and language skills, and gain a deeper understanding of cause and effect. The monitoring of the children's thinking and development was an on-going and natural aspect of Penny's working with children. Observation of children is not exclusive to Reggio Emilia. But the extent of careful documentation is certainly indicative of the Reggio Emilia Experience. Documentation consisted of audio tape and video recordings, in addition to displaying the stages of the project process.

The 3-R's of teacher-as-researcher that guided Penny's project process work with children which lead to deepening the understanding of an event involved Revisiting, Reflecting, and Reinterpreting. This takes time and timing- either over time or later in time.

The teacher-as -researcher is also "listening to children think," and observing and recording their developmental strides and individual intelligences. This research is documented as display panels, and is also a significant sharing experience with other children, parents, adults and visitors. This important step demonstrates what and how children are

learning and their understanding of what they have accomplished during this project process (Firlik, 1993).

Teacher as Researcher

Practical Suggestions for the Practitioner:

* Get into the habit of systematic observation to document children's thinking-devise checklists, that are practical and easy to use.
*Document anything that a child perceives as important to them
*Document anything that the teacher perceives as developmentally and individually substantial that demonstrates the child's cognitive and social strengths and utilization of multiple intelligences
* The judgment -to -record is if a child has constructed new ideas and has reinvented something for him/herself.
* Document by using tape and video recorder, photos, observations -Hint: leave a small notebook with pencil or tape recorder in children's work areas so you are always ready to document
* Utilize parents as much as possible- they are just waiting to be invited by the teacher and the child(ren)

4 THE ENVIRONMENT AS THE THIRD EDUCATOR

In Reggio Emilia preschools, the environment, which includes in/outdoor space, the piazza, the lighting, is thought of and utilized as the

third educator- along with the children and adults. Loris Malaguzzi, the founding father and genius of the Reggio Emilia Experience, talked about space this way: "We value space because of its power to organize and promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, creates beauty, provides changes, and promotes choices and activities." (Gandini, 1991). Space and its proven potential to organize and promote choices is something we have not fully develop in America. For Penny, "the environment where children work and play is of utmost importance if we truly believe in individually, developmentally and diverse appropriate practices." The environment is everything! The awareness of the beauty and power of natural and in-direct lighting is fantastic. Light and shadows can foster different perspectives on colored glass, space stations, plants, displays, and adult work areas. Designed space allows children easy access to pick-up stations such as art materials and supplies. Obviously, an important component of the environment as the third educator is the use of only quality instruments and materials, with plenty of different materials for children to choose. And, of course, space must be allotted for documentation -preparation areas that are so important for teachers to record children's thinking and problem-solving talents.

Penny carefully arranged work areas designed for choice. An overly structured and planned environment was referred to by Professor Malaguzzi, as "only for industry, not education." Malaguzzi continued, "education can not be planned-it can be designed and projected, but not planned." Nonetheless, the adaptation of this important theme of organizating the environment must be built on a firm knowledge of child

development. This was very apparent in Reggio Emilia and in the children's room where Penny utilized the designated space in the total environment as an enabler for children's mental leaps, and stability of feelings.

Penny indicated that "the sharing of something you have worked carefully and deliberately on, over time, is very satisfying and does a great deal in building self esteem." This is of course true for both children and adults. The piazza of Italy became the meeting area for sharing of ideas, differing points of view and feelings in Penny's room.

Environment as the Third Educator

Practical Suggestions for the Practitioner:

* Set up the environment of the classroom or school to bring the outside in so there is no limits to a child's imagination or creative thoughts.
* The larger the environment children have to roam, the more space to enable children to have alternative choices.
* All children's environments should have plants, bright natural lighting, and allocate isolated, small, and large work and play spaces
* From an adults perpective, is the environment that is shared by children and adults, safe, warm, attractive, easy traffic flow, colorful, but not too distracting?
* Are there more display spaces available for children's work then the teachers?
* Have plenty of materials and supplies easily visible and accessible by children for individual choice

Summary

I have described in some detail the creative and expressive potentials that all children, and adults, innately possess which is facilitated by a carefully constructed environment. I mentioned the important and distinctive role of the teacher in such an environment. I believe that any caring-thinking teacher who accepts and adapts these assumptions about children and the way they learn, can quite easily establish a positive and natural relationship with children, parents and other adults that are important to children.

American early school reform does not mean that we must adopt every good practices from across the nation or abroad, but it does mean that we ought to adapt more deliberately and consciously those practices that more closely are associated with what we already know and believe about how children learn. As Penny's project-process demonstrated- by adapting and trusting what she already knew about how children learn she was better able to encourage children's natural creativity and intelligences through relevant, engaging and meaning activities. Furthermore, Penny "projected" an environment conducive for imagination and creative expression- The consequences of such an endeavor can only assure quality and lasting experiences for children and adults.

Conclusions

As an administrator for over twenty years, in four countries, I feel I must leave a message for other administrators who may read or are

presented with this paper to read from a practitioner. I firmly believe we have an important enabling role to play for all early childhood practitioners. Reggio Emilia preschools do not have administrators or headteachers. We do, therefore, we must encourage teachers and children to be the curriculum makers. After observing and studying the Reggio Emilia Experience, learning from Penny and her children and parents, and from my international administrative perspective, I endorse and support the Administrator's Enabling Role in Promoting Development-The Aim of Education

Administrator's Enabling Role in Promoting Development - The Aim of Education

* Encourage teachers to share their successes.
* Provide plenty of space around the school for documentation and display so process and product can be shared with children, parents and teachers.
* Go out of your way to invite parents to be part of classrooms.
* Visit early childhood classrooms often and ask children "what are you doing to do next?" You will be pleasantly surprised.
* Allow yourself the time for observing the project- process from start to completion- at least at different stages.
* Allow an abundance of planning time for teachers.
* Budget adequate funds for quality materials and plenty of supplies such as video tapes, tape recorders, cameras and film.

* Encourage practitioners by giving them time to develop-Note- The Reggio Emilia Experience has evolved for over 40 years!
* Funding for a Sony video printer would be fantastic.
* Recognize and celebrate the important role that early childhood practitioners play in the growth and development of children and parents
* What really matter at school is how each child spends their day at school - Ask this question each day -has it been the best day possible for each and every child and adult?

Roland Barth, a British primary school enthusiast during the movement in the United States and a leader in advocating the principal's role as change agents in schools, passionately states ..."the fundamental mandate of school reform is to examine every decision, practice and policy, and to ask of it the question: "What, if anything, is anyone learning as a consequence of this?" The consequence, Roland, from my experiences, is that something deeper then just surface learning has happened- it is learning for understanding.

Ironically, some twenty years ago, Ron Edmonds introduced us to the words, "All children can learn"... Let me submit that "all school administrators and early childhood practitioners can learn- WE did, and that's what it means to be educators.

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